

## Lubberts delivers timely 'Green Thumb Wisdom' seminar to guide spring planting



Paul Lubberts, an Urban Agricultural Coordinator for the York Region Food Network, delivered an engaging 'Green Thumb Wisdom' seminar to fifty Optimist Club dinner meeting attendees at the Aurora Soccer Club on Wednesday night.

Lubberts acknowledged the roomful of Optimists in his post-dinner presentation, mused about what it would mean to be an Optimist, and then described himself as a 'content pessimist' much to the amusement of his audience.

After breaking the ice with the service club's dinner guests, Lubberts showed his true colors as an ardent advocate of community gardens and composting—two items near and dear to his heart.

'I've had a lifelong fascination with plants and seeds, so much of my hope is tied to decay and decomposition.'

The ironically-humorous tone and insights delivered by the congenial community gardener were appreciated by his audience and Lubberts encouraged The Optimists 'to compost in either bins or heaps' to 'encourage healthy plant growth and soil enrichment.'

He offered a refreshing fascination with the growth and rebirth connected with spring: 'Seed sprouts are part of the deepest magic that we encounter in our natural world.'

Lubberts—resplendent in a warm red toque to combat the unseasonable cold conditions outside—delineated the benefits of composting as a key to healthy gardens and landscaping: 'It only takes seventeen elements—a combination of micronutrients and macronutrients—to grow healthy plants. Compost is comprised of all the elements that plants need. It holds nutrients in their most natural form, it enlivens the soil, its organic materials increase water retention, and it improves catch and charge rates through root systems.'

He offered insights into the 'Soil Food Web'—a microbial soup that is both robust and self-regulating.

'Every organism needs to eat and composting encourages the health of 30,000 species of bacteria that live in our healthy gardens. The Soil Food Web is robust and self-regulating. The bacteria are custodians of the Soil Food Web and develop a symbiotic relationship with fungi.'

This balance is adversely affected by many kinds of chemical fertilizers and Lubberts cautioned the gardeners to use it sparingly, if

at all.

Some chemical fertilizers have harmful effects on the ecosystems that exist in the soil. Floods in fields used for agricultural production are often caused by improper fertilizing that has destroyed the water retention of soil. When we use compost more than fertilizers, we go beyond feeding the plants. We develop a vibrant, adaptive community that provides an environment for plants to thrive and survive.

Lubberts also discussed a gardener's connectivity to the land and to the natural world.

In an inspirational anecdote to close his presentation, the urban agriculturist, who coordinates 20,000 square feet of community gardens in Aurora, made a moving reference to his Opa from the Netherlands. He spoke of his grandparent's essence floating through him and others as he, like all organisms, broke down and became one with the Earth again.

In a closing pitch, Lubberts implored his audience to "Mulch away," to deploy "cover cropping to recharge and regenerate rich soil," and encouraged gardeners to "manage greens and browns, including lawn clippings" to maximize the benefits of composting.

After receiving an Optimist Club cap and a bottle of organic maple syrup produced by the award-winning Sugaring Aurora Project, Lubberts also expressed his gratitude for his role as the York Region Food Network's Urban Agriculture Coordinator.

"It's been a gift to find my way back into gardening. The community garden plots remove barriers for so many who want to garden and grow their own food. It's great to create more and more spaces for passionate people who love gardening. It develops a deeper sense of community and connectivity, especially since there's so much food insecurity. Our collective gardens donate so much to local food banks."

Lubberts spoke glowingly of the community garden's productivity in 2024.

"We were able to produce 160 kilograms of food from just one 200-square foot space in the garden for a not-for-profit. That garden generated various kinds of kale, carrots, beets, and scallions to help combat food insecurity. We also provided food for asylum seekers; specifically, vegetables that were connected to their heritage, including callaloo and African collards, which are staples for so many meals. Producing food that is specific to communities is very satisfying."

The York Region Food Network rep also distributed an array of seed packages—corn, beets, onions, Stringless Green Pod Bush beans, Kentucky Wonder Pole beans; acorn, buttercup, and butternut squash; Grand Rapids and Early Curled Simpson lettuce; leeks, carrots, tomatoes—for attendees. It was another perk of membership in the vibrant Optimist Club which is celebrating its 40th year of service to the Town of Aurora.

**By Jim Stewart**